

Library, Teaching and Learning

Academic Writing Skills

Punctuation Basics



Why worry about punctuation?

Punctuation helps the reader to understand the meaning of your sentences. In this booklet you will find out about some of the basics of punctuation, especially aspects which are important in academic writing.

Punctuation styles vary. You will find, for instance, that some “rules” in American usage differ from those in British usage. Whichever style you choose to follow, use it consistently. In this booklet we have followed the guidelines outlined in the New Zealand publication *Write Edit Print: Style Manual for Aotearoa/New Zealand* (Lincoln University Press, 1997).¹

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¹ For simplicity, most of sample sentences in this booklet have not been individually referenced. Sentences containing direct quotes have been referenced to illustrate APA referencing conventions. All quoted and paraphrased material is from *World Resources 1994-5* (World Resources Institute, 1994).

Capital letters

Capital letters are used for:

1. The first letter of a proper noun (e.g. name of person or place)

For example,

Canterbury

Smith

November

2. Referring to oneself as “I”

3. The first word of a sentence

4. The main words in titles

For example,

*The **P**arliamentary **C**ommissioner for the **E**nvironment has announced a new programme to encourage energy efficiency.*

*The **S**ustainable **E**nergy **C**onference will be held in November.*

5. The beginning of a quote, if it is a full sentence

For example,

*The United States commented, "**P**rocedurally, we believe that the hasty and disjointed approach to the preparation of the convention has deprived delegations of the ability to consider the text as a whole before adoption" (Barber, 1994, p.156).*

Full Stops

Full stops are used:

1. At the end of a sentence

2. In abbreviations²

(a) Do not use full stops after:

- Symbols or units of measurement

For example,

<i>sq m</i>	<i>min (minute)</i>	<i>°C</i>
<i>km</i>	<i>hr (hour)</i>	<i>p (probability)</i>

- Acronyms (a word formed from the first letter of each word of the name of an organisation etc.)

For example,

ASEAN UNESCO NATO

(These acronyms can also be written as *Asean*, *Unesco*, and *Nato*. Both forms are acceptable – choose one and use it consistently.)

- Personal titles

For example,

Mr Ms Dr

(b) For other types of abbreviations, use full stops in abbreviations written in lower case letters only, or with only an initial capital letter.

For example

<i>a.m.</i>	<i>p. (page)</i>	<i>Jan.</i>
<i>p.m.</i>	<i>pp. (pages)</i>	<i>Mon.</i>
<i>e.g.</i>	<i>Ibid.</i>	<i>Ed.</i>

Note:

* Abbreviations such as *e.g.*, *i.e.*, and *&* are usually used only in figures or tables, footnotes, or citations (references) in parentheses. In the main body of your text, write them in full (*for example*, *that is*, *and*).

* In *et al.*, only the “*al.*” is an abbreviation, so there is no full stop after “*et*”.

(c) Do not use full stops in abbreviations consisting of more than one capital letter.

For example

MSc PTO USA BC

² Remember that there are several acceptable styles of punctuation and, in particular, a variety of styles for placing full stops in abbreviations. These guidelines are based on *Write, Edit, Print* (1997).

Commas

Some style guides give so many rules for the use of commas that it is easy to become confused. The best piece of advice to bear in mind is that commas help the writer to communicate clearly and unambiguously. By separating sentences into “sections”, commas clarify the meaning and make the sentence easier to read.

Commas are used in five main ways:

- 1. To separate two independent clauses joined by a co-ordinating conjunction**
- 2. To separate an introductory word, phrase or clause from the rest of the sentence**
- 3. To separate “extra” (non-essential) information from the rest of the sentence.**
- 4. To separate a final phrase from the rest of the sentence**
- 5. To separate items in a series**

1. To separate two independent clauses joined by a co-ordinating conjunction (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so)

Independent clause	, <u>co-ordinating conjunction</u>	independent clause
--------------------	------------------------------------	--------------------

An independent clause, or main clause, is a statement that could stand on its own as a separate sentence. In other words, it is a group of words containing a subject and a verb and expressing a complete thought. Two independent clauses can be joined with a connecting word, called a co-ordinating conjunction, to make a longer sentence. A comma is needed before the co-ordinating conjunction.³

For example,

This approach is useful for protecting global biodiversity, but it gives little protection to diversity at the local level.

Natural gas is more widely distributed among developing countries than oil, and supplies are large enough to last nearly three times longer than the developed world's scarce oil resources.

Gas turbines derived from aircraft engine technology are modular in design, so they can be installed quickly.

³ If you would like to know more about types of clauses and other aspects of sentence structure, see our handouts “Clauses & Phrases”, “Simple Sentences”, “Compound Sentences” and “Complex Sentences”.

2. To separate an introductory word, phrase or clause from the rest of the sentence

Introductory word, phrase or clause

,

independent clause

An introductory word, phrase or clause is usually separated from the main part of the sentence (the independent clause) by a comma.

For example,

After a word:

Overall , the major regions have expanded their use of aluminium and copper.

However , the arid lands of the West often recover slowly, as harsh temperatures and scant rainfall make the growing season short.

After a phrase:

In addition , the well-publicised threat to the traditional indigenous communities that inhabit tropical forests has ...

According to McCann (1994, p.118) , "Biotechnology is no panacea".

On a regional basis , South America has the highest percentage of vegetated land in such areas.

Along with these practical functions , biodiversity is valued by many for the recreational and non-tangible benefits that wildlife and wild areas offer.

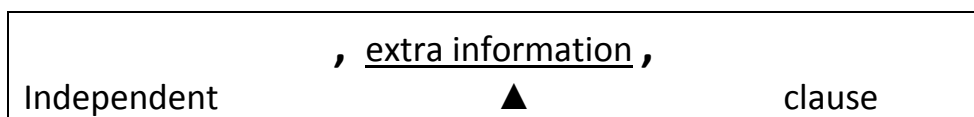
After a dependent clause:⁴

Although livestock numbers are down today , competition with wildlife still exists.

Because fees are small , most firms choose to pay them rather than invest in pollution-controlling equipment.

⁴ In sentences in which the dependent clause comes after the independent clause (e.g. *Competition with wildlife still exists although livestock numbers are down.*), there is usually no comma between the clauses unless one is necessary to clarify the meaning. See *Write Edit Print* (1997) for more detail.

3. To separate “extra” (non-essential) information from the rest of the sentence.



Sometimes a word, phrase, or clause containing extra information is inserted into a sentence. This information is not essential to the meaning of the sentence and, to some extent, interrupts the sentence. In these sentences, you should put a comma before and after the “extra information” word, phrase or clause to separate it from the main clause of the sentence.

For example,

Acid precipitation, however, crosses national boundaries.

Forests, extremely diverse biological communities, produce a range of products.

Parks and reserves, where human activity is theoretically strictly controlled, form the bulwark of conventional habitat conservation.

Note: Not all clauses beginning with *which*, *where* or *who* are “extra information” clauses. Some clauses contain "essential" information and are not separated off by commas. Look at the punctuation, and the different meanings, of the following two sentences:

1. *The city's parks and reserves, which are under the control of the Christchurch City Council, are now being considered as potential sites for cellphone towers.*

(In other words, all the parks and reserves are under the control of the CCC and all are being considered as potential sites.)

2. *Parks and reserves which are under the control of the Christchurch City Council are now being considered as potential sites for cellphone towers.*
(In other words, only some of Christchurch's parks and reserves are under the control of the CCC; only those parks and reserves controlled by the CCC are being considered potential sites. This could also be written as *Parks and reserves that are under the control of the Christchurch City Council are now being considered as potential sites for cellphone towers.*, or *Parks and reserves under the control of the Christchurch City Council are now being considered as potential sites for cellphone towers.*)

4. To separate a final phrase from the rest of the sentence

Independent clause

,

extra information or linking
word/phrase

Sometimes an “extra” piece of information (or a linking word or phrase) is added to the end of a sentence. The extra information is usually separated from the rest of the sentence by a comma.

For example

Forest cover is rapidly declining in central Europe, for example.

Pollution threatens biodiversity, particularly in aquatic areas.

5. To separate items in a series

For example,

Diversity is important in ecosystems because of the human services they provide: cycling water, gas, nutrients and other materials.

Usually, no comma is placed before the final “and”, unless the absence of a comma would cause ambiguity.

Semicolons

A semicolon is used in two ways:

1. To link two closely related sentences

When two sentences are closely related in meaning, you can use a semicolon to join them (rather than use a full stop to separate them). The semicolon highlights the fact that there is a close relationship between the two sentences.

You can use a semicolon on its own to link two independent clauses (sentences).

Independent clause

;

independent clause

For example,

On a regional basis, South America has the highest percentage of vegetated land in undisturbed areas; Europe has the lowest, almost all of it in the northern countries.

You can also use a semicolon with a linking word or phrase. It can be used before a conjunctive adverb (e.g. moreover, however, therefore, finally) and some transition phrases (e.g. in addition, on the other hand, for example, in fact).⁵

Independent clause

; linking word or phrase ,

independent clause

For example,

The threat pesticides pose to human health is particularly potent in the developing world, where most serious exposure occurs; in fact, pesticide poisoning represents a major occupational hazard for farmers and their families.

2. To separate sections of a list

Sometimes, using commas between items in a list would not be enough to clearly separate those items. This may be the case when the individual items already contain commas. In this situation, you need the “extra strength” of the semicolon to show the reader where one item finishes and the next begins.

For example,

Scientists define biodiversity at several levels: genetic diversity, the variation between individuals and between populations within a species; species diversity, the different types of plants, animals, and other life forms within a region; and community or ecosystem diversity, the variety of habitats found within an area.

⁵ For more information on linking words and phrases, see our handout “Transition Signals”.

Colons

A colon is used to introduce material which explains or adds detail.

Independent clause	:	independent clause, list or quote
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There are three common situations in which you can use a colon:

1. To introduce an explanation, clarification or extra detail

For example,

Ranchers regard their use of the land as a public service: they keep the land in production and provide a valuable commodity for the American market.

Most of the world's biodiversity is located in the tropics: some forty to ninety percent of the world's species live in tropical forests.

2. To introduce a list or series

For example,

Of the forest cover in industrialised countries, over two thirds is in three countries: the former Soviet Union, Canada, and the United States.

Scientists define biodiversity at several levels: genetic diversity, the variation between individuals and between populations within a species; species diversity, the different types of plants, animals, and other life forms within a region; and ecosystem diversity, the variety of habitats found within an area.

3. To introduce a quote of one sentence or longer.

For example,

The United States has made its position clear: "Procedurally, we believe that the hasty and disjointed approach to the preparation of the Convention has deprived delegations of the ability to consider the text as a whole before adoption" (Barber, 1994, p.156).

McCann (1994, p.118) cautions against regarding biotechnology as a panacea for problems with food production:

It will not displace traditional breeding programmes or pest management and cultivation practices that strive to minimise ecological damage and soil loss. Nor will it end world hunger. Biotechnology's contribution to agricultural...

Apostrophes

Apostrophes have two main uses:

1. To show possession

This is where the most confusion arises. You need to remember the following rules:

(a) When to use an apostrophe to show possession:

- Use an apostrophe after the name of a person or thing to which something belongs

For example,

the essay's title = the title belonging to the essay

New Zealand's economy = the economy belonging to New Zealand

- Use an apostrophe after indefinite pronouns (such as *someone, anybody, everyone, no one, each other, someone else*)

For example,

someone's property = property belonging to someone

anyone's opinion = an opinion belonging to anyone

someone else's idea = an idea belonging to someone else

(b) When NOT to use an apostrophe

- Do not use an apostrophe to show possession with possessive pronouns (such as *his, hers, yours, ours, theirs, its, mine*). These words already show possession.

For example,

Here is his pen.

This book is mine but that one is yours.

The company increased its profits.

Note: *it's* is only used when it means *it is*

(c) Where to put the apostrophe to show possession

- In most cases add 's after the original word

For example,

With singular nouns:

the essay's title = the title of the essay

the woman's office = the office belonging to the woman

the boss's office = the office belonging to the boss

With plural nouns not ending in s :

the people's voice = the voice of the people

the women's refuge = the refuge belonging to the women

- But, for plural nouns ending in s you need to add only '

For example,

the companies' statements = the statements belonging to the companies

the businesses' profits = the profit of the businesses

two weeks' salary = the salary for two weeks

2. To show that part of a word is missing

For example,

who's = who is *can't = can not*

let's = let us *there's = there is*

it's = it is *you're = you are*⁶

These types of words, however, are informal. In academic writing, you should always write these words in full (for example, do not, will not, cannot, it is).

⁶ “**you’re**” and “**your**” are often confused. Remember that “**you’re**” is an abbreviated form of “**you are**”, just as “**it’s**” is an abbreviated form of “**it is**”. If you confuse similar words, such as you’re/your, there/their/they’re, our handout on spelling (or one of our tutors) may provide some useful strategies.

Quotation marks

Quotation marks are used:

1. To identify direct quotes

(a) When to use quotation marks with quotes

If you include a short direct quote in your writing, you must enclose it in quotation marks.

For example,

Allowing US patent protection for neem products, the report goes on, is to condone “theft of knowledge and resources” (Shiva, 1993, p.5).

If you include a relatively long quote (for example, in APA style, 40 words or more), you should indent it. No quotation marks are necessary.

For example,

*The review highlights several aspects of natural resource consumption that, it claims, reveal some surprising differences from conventional wisdom:
It is renewal resources that are most in danger of depletion, not non-renewable resources; the industrial countries as a group are the source of the majority of the natural resources that they consume (petroleum and a few other commodities are the major exceptions); and export of manufactured goods from developed countries to industrial countries is growing much more rapidly than the export of raw materials.
(Hammond, 1994, p.1)*

(b) Where to place punctuation marks with quotes

The rules for placing punctuation marks inside and outside quoted material are complex, but in general:

- Put any punctuation marks which are part of the original quote ***inside*** the quotation marks.

For example,

According to Barber (1994, p. 152), the key question is: “How effective are protected areas in conserving biodiversity?”

- Put any punctuation marks related to your sentence as a whole **outside** the quotation marks.

For example,

According to Shiva (1993, p.5), allowing US patent protection for neem products condones the “theft of knowledge and resources”.

- When a sentence contains your words as well as a quote, put the final full stop **after** the quotation marks (and after any citation). This avoids having two full stops if the quote itself contains a full stop.

For example,

The United States commented, “Procedurally, we believe the hasty and disjointed approach to the preparation of the Convention has deprived delegations, from all regions, of the ability to consider the text as a whole before adoption” (Barber, 1994, p.156).

2. To highlight unusual words, unusual (or ironic) uses of a word, or to distinguish words in a sentence

For example,

The debate quickly escalated into a “seed war” between the North and South.

Wilson (1993) documents the “progress” we have made in the pursuit of world peace.

Many students confuse the words “effect” and “affect”.

The term “rangelands” refers to land on which native vegetation is predominantly grasses, forbs, and shrubs.

3. To indicate titles

For example,

The theme of “World Resources 1994-95” is biodiversity.

Double or single ?

Traditionally double quotation marks (“...”) have been the most commonly used, with single quotation marks (‘...’) being used to denote a quote within a quote.

For example,

According to Barber (1994, p.162), “some branded the United States an ‘environmental outlaw’”.

In many modern publications, however, single quotation marks are used, with double quotation marks being used for a quote within a quote. You should choose one of these styles and use it consistently.

Parentheses

Parentheses should be used sparingly in academic writing. Avoid using them to include comments or statements essential to the meaning of the sentence; in general, if the idea is important enough to be in your paper, it should be in the “main” part of the sentence.

Parentheses have three main uses:

1. To enclose additional information not essential to the meaning or the grammar of the sentence

For example,

Five countries (India, Indonesia, Brazil, Vietnam, and Thailand) are home to 85% of these plantations.

2. To add a fact, such as a name, a number, an abbreviation or a source

For example,

The Commissioner for the Environment (Morgan Williams) has announced a new programme to promote energy efficiency in homes.

Sudan loses the most forest area (81,000 hectares per year), followed by Botswana (58,000 hectares).

The Department of Conservation (DOC) has suggested that ...

The latest predictions suggest that 30% of the region’s forest cover will be lost within the next decade (Smith, 1994).

3. To enclose numbers or letters in a numbered list

For example,

The debate over international environmental institutions has not been entirely fruitful because it uncritically accepts the conventional international law perspective that (a) the only entity with the power to negotiate or decide at the international level are nation-states; (b) that a state is the sole international representative of everyone within its borders; and (c) that it is the legitimate international representative of its citizens.

Brackets

Brackets are used to show changes in wording in a quote

If you have to add or change the wording of a direct quote to make its meaning clearer or to make it fit smoothly into your sentence, enclose the changes in [] to show that they are not part of the original quote.

For example,

Original text:

“In short, women have a profound and pervasive effect on the well-being of their families, communities, and local ecosystems. Therefore, inequities that are detrimental to them – be it to their physical and mental health, income earning ability, education, and/or decision making power, to name a few – are detrimental as well to society at large and to the environment” (Thrupp, 1994, p.43).

As quoted in your paper:

Thrupp (1994, p.43) maintains that “inequities that are detrimental to [women] – be it to their physical and mental health, income earning ability, education, and/or decision making power, to name a few – are detrimental as well to society at large and to the environment”.

Dashes

Dashes are rather informal punctuation marks and should, therefore, be used sparingly in academic writing. Dashes can perform a similar function to parentheses, commas and colons, but tend to be used to make a stronger break in the sentence.

Dashes have two main uses:

1. To add “extra” information to a clause

(Instead of parentheses or commas)

For example,

Five countries – India, Indonesia, Brazil, Vietnam, and Thailand – are home to 85% of these plantations.

In this example, notice how the “additional” information contains commas. In this case, separating the additional information from the rest of the sentence with dashes, rather than with commas, helps to avoid ambiguity.

2. To emphasise a phrase or clause, or to add a comment

(Instead of a colon)

For example,

Most of the world’s biodiversity is located in the tropics – some 40 to 90 percent of the world’s species live in tropical forests.

The new biotechnology has the potential to dramatically improve conditions in developing nations – but, so far, it has failed to live up to its early promise.

For more detail ...

If you would like to know more about why and how we use punctuation, visit our website at <http://library.lincoln.ac.nz/> or ask at the Service Point about the workshops, drop-in sessions, and individual appointments we offer.

The following style guides will also provide more detail:

American Psychological Association. (2010). *Publication manual of the American Psychological Association* (6th ed.). Washington, DC: Author.

American Psychological Association. (2007). *APA style guide to electronic references*. Washington, DC: Author.

Buxton, J. & Carter, S. (2007). *Punc rocks*. Auckland, New Zealand: Pearson Education.

Rozakis, L. (2003). *English grammar for the utterly confused*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Write Edit Print: Style Manual for Aotearoa/New Zealand. (1997). Lincoln, Canterbury, New Zealand: Lincoln University Press.

“Punctuation Basics”, along with other resources, is also available on our web site at <http://library.lincoln.ac.nz/>

Note:

All quoted and paraphrased material in this booklet comes from:

World Resources Institute. (1994). *World Resources 1994-5*. Oxford: OUP.

In academic writing, any quotes and paraphrases would normally be individually referenced, but in this booklet some of the citations have been omitted in order to more clearly highlight punctuation conventions. If you are unsure about why, when and how to reference, read our handout “Referencing: Why, when & how”.

